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On Campuses, Seeing The Military With New Eyes After Sept. 11

By David W. Chen

At Seton Hall University, some students who previously ignored the R.O.T.C. cadets roaming around campus now regard their uniformed classmates as - of all things - cool. Some have been so inspired that they say they may join the military, too.

At Bronx Community College, where military service has always been an attractive avenue to win a scholarship, some students who had previously thought of joining the military now say they won't. They are too scared.

At Columbia University, where students have for decades shared a liberal disdain for all things military, some students say they have had a change of heart. A small group has even formed a new, pro-military organization.

In ways large and small, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 have altered how college students regard the military, the prospect of military service and their peers who decide to join. The reaction varies from campus to campus, but what emerges from interviews on three distinctly different campuses in the New York area is a complex and sometimes surprising portrait of students who are rethinking their views of the military - or for the first time thinking about the role of the military in American life.

Even with the war effort seemingly going well, few students believe that the military buildup will suddenly subside.

Most say they would serve if asked, though some say they are afraid to die. Few challenge the reasons of those who do join. And while some students, particularly at Columbia, oppose the war in Afghanistan, few question whether one should be loyal or patriotic.

"Growing up, I was very anti-establishment, anti-American government," said Margot Schulman, a Columbia junior and premed student. "But since Sept. 11, I have softened my views about everything."

Of the three campuses, Seton Hall, a private Catholic university in South Orange, N.J., has witnessed the greatest display of patriotism among its students, who are generally conservative.

After the attacks, dozens of students either called military recruiters or talked to resident advisers about joining the military. When R.O.T.C. students conduct their exercises on campus, more classmates seem to notice.

"People come up to me and are extremely interested in the military," said Colin Kelly, a Seton Hall senior and economics major who is the student leader, or battalion commander, of the campus R.O.T.C. "Usually they'll say that it's cool that you do it."

Aubrey Carpe, a sophomore journalism major, reflects the changes.

Mr. Carpe said he used to worship anti-establishment punk-rock groups like Anti-Flag, "but I feel totally weird listening to that now." A fan of Neil Young, Bob Dylan and other icons from

the 1960's, he finds the lyrics of protest, suddenly, to be off-key.

"It's cool what they're saying, but this is not Vietnam at all," he said. "This is terrorism." Now he says he admires the patriotism of his friends in R.O.T.C.

Even dovish students said they were not opposed to the military, per se. Jonathan Ernesto, a sophomore business major at Seton Hall who participated in a recent event promoting tolerance called Circle of Unity, said that he hoped civilians would not be hurt in Afghanistan, and that he had developed an interest in joining either the Navy or the F.B.I.

After one recent late-afternoon Mass on campus, Junno Arocho, a freshman from Newark, said that he was now contemplating a stint in the Army.

"With everything that's happened, it's made me think," said Mr. Arocho, who is studying diplomacy. "What am I going to do with my life? Being part of the U.S. is not just being a citizen, it's being able to defend life and defend the existence of mankind as we know it."

That gung-ho enthusiasm is less evident at Bronx Community College, part of the City College of New York. Sure, there is an Army Reserve site opposite the campus entrance. Sure, many students have long considered the military because of its scholarships.

But for many students, joining the military has usually meant exchanging the hazards of a tough neighborhood for the economic benefits of a relatively safe military life.

"I don't want to fight in a war; I'd rather go to jail," said Paul Brown, 21, a Bronx native and radiology major. "I might have a chance in jail, but if I go to war, I might be dead in 0.5 seconds."

Randy Rampersaud, 19, said that he once thought about joining the military. But because his family is of Indian descent, via Guyana, he worries that he might be viewed with suspicion. As a result, he said would serve only if there was a draft or a great need for enlisted men.

More than half of the student body at Bronx Community College is foreign-born, including 32 percent from the Dominican Republic alone. And generally, immigrants volunteer for military service more readily than the natives, partly because they are eager to prove their patriotism.

But most students sound like Edward Polanco, 26, who came from the Dominican Republic six years ago. At first, he wanted to join the American military to emulate his older brother, who was an army sergeant in the Dominican Republic. But then came Sept. 11.

"Before, I was thinking that it would be good for my résumé, because anywhere you go, you say, 'I was in the Army,' they give you a job easily," said Mr. Polanco, a computer science major who works part time as a security guard. "But now it's scary. Everyone I see, they are scared. They don't want to go. My family doesn't want me to go."

For decades, antipathy toward the military has never been in short supply at Columbia, where students protesting the Vietnam War once occupied campus buildings. And in response to the current crisis, some students, particularly those active in recent antiglobalization protests, have formed a new antiwar group called People for Peace.

One member, Yvonne Liu, a junior who is a neuroscience major, said: "It's definitely something that I'm not

comfortable with. It's like sending the poorest and most marginalized people in our nation to be killed in the name of corporate interests."

But Columbia is also the birthplace of another student group, Students United for Victory, founded after the attacks to support the military.

"I was expecting people to confront me and try to provoke me, because this is a college campus in a liberal city, and Columbia has a history of antiwar protests," said Lovinsky Joseph, a freshman from Linden, N.J., who is the group's spokesman. "But I've never received anything like that. In fact, I would say that two-thirds of the students have been supportive."

One student who once considered joining the Navy, Carly Burton, a junior from Austin, Tex., said that a few friends had considered volunteering after Sept. 11 because "they don't want to sit back, 10 years, 20 years from now, and say, 'I wasn't a part of it.' " But she decided against it. Ms. Burton says she believes that she could contribute more to society by becoming an investment banker.

Some students acknowledge that they feel somewhat removed from the military, because they have the luxury of cocooning themselves in academia. Even so, most say that they no longer view the military as something alien and distant from their lives, and they expect that the military will be a looming presence for some time to come.

"Before, the military was like the little place in Times Square where you could sign up, and I never knew anyone who did it," said Jennifer Lynn Stermer, a junior and an English major from Manhattan. "Now, I feel - I don't know if respect is the right word - but I'm

thankful that there are people willing to do that."